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# ***Absolute* Counterpurposiveness? On Kant's First Arguments Against Theodicy**

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the first of Kant's anti-theodicean arguments as unfolded in his 1791 *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*. In this argument, Kant coins a neologism, the absolute counterpurposive (=ACP), and vehemently rejects the theodicean claim that denies that there is ACP in the world. As I show, Kant's rejection of the theodicean denial of ACP is not based on epistemological, but on moral grounds: a denial of ACP seems to lead to a denial of the unconditional status of morality. Thus, it is not the denial of ACP as such but rather the *consequence* of its denial that truly troubles Kant. Upon thoroughly construing Kant's argument, and unveiling two major ambiguities which lurk in his argument, I argue that Kant's anti-theodicean argument is not cogent.

## **1 Introduction**

Theodicy is, on the whole, the attempt of reason to justify God given the existence of evil in the world; as such, it seems to assume knowledge about God's conjectural considerations in allowing evil. However, the inherent limitation of human reason – the Kantian view thereof which underlies his critical project – precludes us, anyway, from knowing anything about God, including questions about God's existence, as Kant's celebrated rejection of every ontological, cosmological and physicotheological attempts at a demonstration of the existence of God in the first *Critique* vividly shows. It appears, thus, that one of the inevitable consequences of Kant's critical philosophy *as such* is the denial of our capacity to provide a sound theodicean argument. Much like other metaphysical questions, then, the question of theodicy seems to be, from a systematic Kantian point of view, irresolvable to our finite reason.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the eighteenth-century unique intellectual climate, which enabled an intensive discourse on theodicy, see Geyer 1982, 383–405; Welmüller 1979, 189–200; Schmidt-Biggemann 1988; Lindau 1911.

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However, a careful examination of Kant's writings after 1781 reveals that the question of theodicy seems to achieve a unique status in his work. Some commentators share the opinion that Kant's celebrated denial of the very possibility of theodicy in his 1791 *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee* (=MpVT) is, by no means, a direct consequence of his critical philosophy, but is rather linked to some specific development *within* this project.<sup>2</sup> According to this interpretation, Kant still thought that theodicy was possible after the first and the second *Critiques* were published, and even after publishing his third *Critique* he still maintained this opinion.<sup>3</sup>

However, the question regarding Kant's precise position prior to what seems to be his unequivocal rejection of the possibility of theodicy in MpVT will not be discussed in this paper. Regardless of whether Kant has changed his mind as a *consequence* of his critical project or, rather, due to an inner development *within* his critical project; and regardless of whether Kant's position in MpVT genuinely entails an unequivocal rejection of the very possibility of theodicy or, rather, a rejection of theodicean arguments *thus far* and an introduction of a new theodicean argument,<sup>4</sup> he surely introduces some *new* anti-theodicean arguments in

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**2** Schulte mentions that Kant's *Vorlesungen über Rationaltheologie* (1783f.), as well as his *Ideen zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784) are vivid examples of Kant's positive attitude towards theodicy *within* his critical project; see Schulte 1991, 371–396. See also Cavallar 1993, 90–102. Dieringer sides with Schulte's position in this respect; see Dieringer 2009, 24. Palmquist, on the other hand, mentions, as well, that Kant adopted, prior to MpVT, some "standard solutions" to theodicy; however, he adds that in *Vorlesungen über Rationaltheologie* "Kant is not so much defending his own position, as presenting to his students one of the standard ways of accounting for the existence of evil"; see Palmquist 2000, 454. There are, nevertheless, commentators who are of the opinion that Kant's critical philosophy *as such* implies the miscarriage of theodicy; an example of this view is Kremer 1909, 168. According to Kremer, Kant's critique against the very possibility of demonstrating the existence of God in the first *Critique* suffices, as such, to show that every attempt at a theodicy is impossible. Similarly, according to Marquard, Kant's practical philosophy must be considered, *as such*, as a theodicean argument; Given the premises that constitute Kant's moral theory, so goes Marquard reasoning – it is the free (finite) agent, and not God, that must be held responsible for evil; see Marquard 1973, 52–66. Similar positions still echo in the current literature on the topic; see, for instance, Yakira 2009, 149.

**3** As Marquard rightly remarks, Kant never abandoned the discussion on theodicy, even if he did not allude to this concept after 1781. See Marquard 1973, 58. See also Schulte 1988, 148. On Kant's interest in the question of theodicy prior to 1781 see Thesis 2009, 157–65; Thesis 2001, 351–63.

**4** Brachtendorf 2002, 93. For a somewhat similar position, see Steinbrecher 2007, 205. A middle way between these two alternatives (i.e. between Kant's alleged unequivocal rejection of theodicy and his alleged suggestion of a new theodicean solution) is presented in Dieringer 2009. Dieringer argues that in MpVT Kant offered a philosophical defense of theism (*Verteidigung*) while simultaneously rejecting the possibility of a philosophical theodicy (*Theodizee*). By

*MpVT*. The aim of this paper is to construe and analyze the first<sup>5</sup> of Kant's *new* anti-theodicean arguments and evaluate its cogency in light of Kant's systematic considerations, which constitute his approach to theological issues in general.

## 2 Kant's First Anti-Theodicean Argument: a General Outline

In his first anti-theodicean argument in *MpVT*, Kant puts forward a neologism, which he terms *the absolutely counterpurposive* (henceforth, ACP). Actually, *MpVT* is not the first text in which Kant uses the term *the counterpurposive* in his writings. In the third *Critique*, for instance, Kant mentions this term as well, adding, however, that it is the counterpurposive “at least as far as we can see [*für unsere Einsicht*],”<sup>6</sup> in other words, that it is a conditioned counterpurposive (henceforth, CCP). As we shall see, CCP cannot be condoned or desired as an end, yet it “can do so as means.”<sup>7</sup>

However, in *MpVT* Kant argues, as mentioned above, in favor of an *absolute* counterpurposiveness (ACP), which he explicitly identifies with moral evil. In Kant's own words:

Now whatever is counterpurposive in the world, and may be opposed to the wisdom of its creator, is of a threefold kind: 1. The absolutely counterpurposive, or what cannot be condoned or desired either as end or means, 2. The conditioned counterpurposive, or what can indeed never co-exist with the wisdom of a will as end, yet can do so as means [...], 3. The disproportion between crimes and penalties in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The first kind is “the morally counterpurposive, evil proper (sin),”<sup>9</sup> which threatens God's holiness, and this is the only kind which is designated by Kant as ACP;

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and large, to argue that the factuality of evil is compatible with God's attributes amounts to a philosophical defense of theism, whereas to hypothesize on God's possible reasons for issuing evil constitutes a full-fledged theodicean argument. In raising this distinction Dieringer follows Plantinga and Peterson (see Plantinga 1974, 24–39; Peterson 1998, 33. See also Van Inwagen 2006, 6–8.

5 All in all, in *MpVT* Kant introduces ten different objections against theodicy; the first three possible arguments in favor of theodicy, which Kant brings up by way of refutation, are linked to God's holiness, and the first of them will be discussed thoroughly in this paper.

6 *KU*, AA 05: 439.

7 *MpVT*, AA 08: 256.

8 *MpVT*, AA 08: 256 f.

9 *MpVT*, AA 08: 256 f.

the second is the physical counterpurposive such as pain, which threatens God's alleged goodness, and counts as CCP; and the third corresponds, by and large, to Job's predicament and lamentation to God, best described by the Hebrew phrase *צדיק ורע לו, רשע וטוב לו* (the righteous man suffers; the evil man prospers).

Notice that CCP can essentially be neutralized, regardless of the fact that a finite cognition may not always comprehend precisely *how*; it is, indeed possible, that CCP is, after all, purposive, that is to say that it may serve as *means* to an end. ACP, on the other hand, seems to pose the most severe threat to the very possibility of theodicy, since it cannot be neutralized (it can be neither end nor means) *by definition*.

It is crucial to notice, however, that Kant does not suggest an absolute *affirmation* of the existence of ACP in the world as an anti-theodicean argument; such an absolute affirmation (as well as an absolute denial) of ACP would amount to trespassing reason's inherent limitation. Kant alluded, indeed, to three kinds of "counterpurposive *in the world*;"<sup>10</sup> however, one may not forget the background against which this determination is put forward. Recall that the concept of *Zweck* does not constitute one of Kant's twelve categories, and it has only a regulative or reflective status;<sup>11</sup> thus, just as Kant does not make a *theoretical* claim in favor of an ultimate purpose of nature (knowing that would entail to penetrate the supersensible, and the supersensible lies beyond human cognition), he does not positively affirm the existence of an absolute *counterpurposiveness* in the world. By suggesting ACP as an anti-theodicy argument, Kant refers merely to the impossibility of issuing an absolute denial of ACP; the very *possibility* thus, which we cannot absolutely exclude, according to Kant, that there is an ACP in the world which cannot be reduced to CCP, suffices to show the miscarriage of all philosophical attempts at theodicy.

However, as I will argue, Kant's abovementioned anti-theodicean argument is slightly different, and does not consist solely of the impossibility of making an absolute denial of ACP as the core of the argument. In point of fact, what truly troubles Kant, is the question regarding the precise bond between the concepts of (moral) good and evil, or the *link between a denial of ACP in the world and a denial of the unconditional status of morality*. Generally formulated, Kant's argument against the very possibility of theodicy, involving ACP, is as follows: an ostensive supporter of theodicy might claim that what a finite cognition conceives as ACP may be, or actually is (I will discuss the crucial difference between these two alternatives in due course), from a conjectural divine point of view, CCP. But

<sup>10</sup> *MpVT*, AA 08: 256 f.; my emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> See Düsing 1968, 51–66; Ernst 1909, 26–43.

not only does the empty pretension of trespassing the limits of reason (in case of maintaining *positively* that ACP is CCP, that is to say, in case of maintaining an absolute denial of ACP) rather than humbly admitting that we simply cannot tell whether ACP is CCP or not, troubles Kant here. Rather, the heart of the argument lies elsewhere: according to Kant, holding that moral evil (ACP) represents only “violations against human wisdom”<sup>12</sup> inevitably leads, so it seems, to the claim that morality as such would be rendered conditional as well; if, from a conjectural divine point of view, evil is not absolute, then the concept of good (morality) seems to befall a similar fate.

It is precisely this alleged conclusion that Kant seeks to rule out. In *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, for example, Kant says:

[U]nless we want to deny to the concept of morality all truth and all references to a possible object, we cannot but admit that the moral law is of such widespread significance that it must hold *not merely for men but for all rational beings generally*, and that it must be valid not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but must be absolutely necessary.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, and in many others to be found in Kant's writings on ethics, it is clear that morality, according to Kant is *not* conditioned in the way a finite (human) cognition judges things, but may be granted an objective justification.

Thus, the problem of theodicy, seen from the perspective of Kant's first anti-theodicean argument, is best encapsulated in the following exclusive disjunction: *either* theodicy *or* morality may be undertaken as an unconditional project. By choosing theodicy, not only does Kant's theodicean rival haughtily overstep the limits of reason; rather, and more importantly, he ends up risking, according to Kant, the unconditional status of morality.

Upon demonstrating, in the next two sections, that *this* is indeed the heart of Kant's first anti-theodicean argument, and analyzing, in some detail, a few subtle ambiguities in this regard, I will address several major problems that riddle Kant's argument. All in all, as I will submit, the denial of the absolute status of ACP does *not* necessarily lead to the denial of the unconditional status of morality in Kant's philosophy.

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<sup>12</sup> *MpVT*, AA 08: 258.

<sup>13</sup> *GMU*, AA 04: 413.

### 3 Kant's First Anti-Theodicean Argument: Between Epistemology and Morality

Kant describes, at some length, a conjectural argument in favor of theodicy regarding ACP, and adds, rather concisely, his own refutation of this move:

There is no such thing as an absolute counterpurposiveness which we take the trespassing of the pure laws of our reason to be, but there are violations only against human wisdom; divine wisdom judges these according to totally different rules, incomprehensible to us, where, what we with right find reprehensible with reference to our practical reason and its determination might yet perhaps be in relation to the divine ends and the highest wisdom precisely the most fitting means to our particular welfare and the greatest good of the world as well; the ways of the most high are not our ways (*sunt supris sua iura*), and we err whenever we judge what is law only relatively to human beings in this life to be so absolutely, and thus to hold what appears counterpurposive to our view of things from so lowly a standpoint to be such also when considered from the highest. – This apology, in which the vindication is worse than the complaint, needs no refutation; surely it can be freely given over to the detestation of every human being who has the least feeling of morality.<sup>14</sup>

The apology advocated by the theodicist seems clear enough; what a finite cognition judges as ACP may be – or actually is – from a divine point of view, a fitting means to an end (CCP). From this premise, what seems to be an inevitable upshot may be drawn: “the ways of the most high are not our ways”. As we shall see in the following, the statement “From a conjectural divine point of view, ACP amounts to CCP” and “God’s ways are not our own” are both ambiguous, and in the shift from the first to the second statement there lurks an ambiguity as well. However, Kant seems to refute this apology by plainly stating that it “needs no refutation;” thus, we must carefully elicit Kant’s implied position in this regard.

Some commentators locate Kant’s vehement disapproval of the abovementioned theodicean argument in its implied overstepping of the limits of reason; namely, they argue that Kant rejects this argument on *epistemological* grounds. Kurt Appel holds, for instance, precisely this position when he maintains: “In der Analyse des schlechthin Zweckwidrigen liegt der Unterschied der Zugangsweisen zwischen Leibniz und Kant daher darin, dass Letzterer bestreiten würde, dass man sich auf einen unendlichen Standpunkt innerhalb der Welt des Seins stellen könne, von dem her dieses Sein aus sich selbst gerechtfertigt wäre [...]”.<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, Susan Neiman writes: “What’s wrong with saying that God has ways we cannot understand? For Kant, even this much knowledge is too much

<sup>14</sup> *MpVT*, AA 08: 258.

<sup>15</sup> Appel 2003, 96.

knowledge. To say that God has purposes, though we don't know them, is to say that God has purposes. That's precisely what was in doubt."<sup>16</sup> Those allegations are not incorrect as such, though they ignore a subtle distinction implied in the text, which I will address in the next section; however, as I submit, they fail to recognize that the genuine interest of Kant here is only in a roundabout way epistemological; rather, it is *moral* in essence, since Kant maintains that his rival's claim must ensue "detestation of every human being who has the least feeling of *morality*;" morality, then, rather than epistemology, is at stake here.

Alternatively, several commentators aptly maintain that the core of Kant's argument is moral; Carl-Friedrich Geyer, for instance, holds that "Die Entgegnung des Sachwalters Gottes auf den Vorwurf gegen die Heiligkeit des Schöpfers bezüglich des moralisch Zweckwidrigen nimmt dem Menschen [...] alle Berechtigung zu einem sittlichen Urteil;"<sup>17</sup> Volk Dieringer notes, in a similar way: "Darüber hinaus ist dieser Gedanke [holding that ACP is CCP, viz, a denial of ACP] für unser moralisches Bewußtsein ein Stein des Abstoßes, da er den unbedingten Geltungsanspruch des Moralgesetzes untergräbt;"<sup>18</sup> and Otto Lempp remarks, however concisely, that "diese Verteidigung [...] [vernichtet] die Absolutheit des Sittengesetzes."<sup>19</sup> Similarly to Geyer, Dieringer and Lempp, if focusing, however, on a slightly different issue, Stephen Palmquist argues that "[t]o the first point Kant responds that for God to condone evil for some hidden motive or higher purpose [namely, reducing ACP to CCP] would not make the evil any less evil, but would render *God* immoral and unholy and thus unworthy of our trust and obedience."<sup>20</sup> Whereas Geyer, Dieringer and Lempp contend that rendering ACP as CCP deprives the moral law of its unconditional status (and thence of our ability to justify moral judgment), Palmquist centers on the consequence that such a move would bear for the moral character of *God*.<sup>21</sup> However, since for Kant the

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<sup>16</sup> Neiman 2002, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Geyer 1992, 106.

<sup>18</sup> Dieringer 2009, 104. Dieringer raises another possible reasoning of Kant: the thought, according to which evil deeds of men correspond to the will of God as a holy essence entails "einen Widerspruch in sich." However, Dieringer does not clarify what kind of a contradiction would result from the fact that ACP serves, from an alleged divine perspective, as a means to an (unknown to us) end (namely, CCP).

<sup>19</sup> Otto Lempp 1910, 261.

<sup>20</sup> Palmquist 2000, 456.

<sup>21</sup> Palmquist mentions, as well, what he seems to grasp as a *consequence* of rendering God immoral: God's being, therefore, "unworthy of our trust and obedience."

moral character of God rests on the unconditional status of morality,<sup>22</sup> it seems that Palmquist's stress belongs essentially to the same context as the abovementioned commentators': all emphasize, justly enough, that it is the *moral* upshot of the theodicean denial of ACP that seems to trouble Kant.

Schulte, Brachtendorf, Cavallar, Fontan and Billicsich<sup>23</sup> do not differ in this respect. The bond between the theodist's denial of ACP and allegations such as "God has a different moral law than ours" (viz. that morality loses its unconditional status) is described by Schulte in the following manner: "Was 'unsere praktische Vernunft' als böse beurteilen müsse, könnte, *wenn für Gott ein anderes moralisches Gesetz gilt als für den Menschen*, 'doch im Verhältniss auf Göttliche Zwecke [...] gerade das schicklichste Mittel sowohl für unser besonderes Wohl, als das Weltbeste überhaupt sein.'" <sup>24</sup> For Schulte as well, thus, ACP can be denied only if God has a different moral law. And since an alternative morality "unterbietet und unterläuft Kants kopernikanische Wende in der Philosophie," <sup>25</sup> as Schulte rightly observes, then "*natürlich* weist Kant dieses Argument zurück," <sup>26</sup> as Brachtendorf adds. And in Cavallar words: "Sie [a denial of ACP] bedarf deswegen wie die Behauptung, unsere Begriffe von Gut und Böse seien bloß relative, keiner Widerlegung." <sup>27</sup> In the same spirit, Fontan writes:

A l'argument qui refuse de donner une "valeur" définitive, absolue au désordre moral de l'homme [to ACP, namely moral evil], et qui mettrait Dieu (avec Nietzsche?) au delà de nos mesures et de ce que nous appelons bien et mal, Kant, touché au plus intime, répond: [here comes the citation of the last sentence of the above cited paragraph].<sup>28</sup>

All the commentators of the second group, thus – despite of some subtle differences between them – share the same basic conviction: they assume, in what seems to be in line with Kant's allegation that *if* one holds ACP to be CCP (namely, a denial of ACP) *then* morality, as well, loses its unconditional status.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, this typical remark in favor of moral theology and not of the theological moral: "Not theological morals; for that contains moral laws that *presuppose* the existence of a highest governor of the world, whereas moral theology, on the contrary, is a conviction of the existence of a higher being which grounds itself on moral laws" (*KpR*, A632/B660).

<sup>23</sup> Billicsich merely repeats Kant's last sentence in the paragraph cited above; see Billicsich 1952, 226.

<sup>24</sup> Schulte 1991, 385. My emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Schulte 1991, 385.

<sup>26</sup> Brachtendorf 2002, 71. My emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Cavallar 1993, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Fontan 1976, 384.



It seems to me, however, that dwelling on this seemingly 'natural' link, on which all the abovementioned commentators seem to consent, is worthwhile; at first glance it seems that (a) this was, based on the text, Kant's position, and that (b) this position, in Kantian terms, is cogent. However, if it can be shown, as I am to suggest in the following sections, that Kant's position in this regard is more ambiguous than the one depicted by those commentators, then a series of questions regarding the cogency of his argument would naturally follow.

As a careful reading will show, both the denial of ACP and what seems to be the "natural" consequence of such denial – namely, the allegation that "the ways of the most high are not our ways" – which lead to a denial of morality's unconditional status, are ambiguous. In the following section I wish to present Kant's first anti-theodicean argument slightly differently; this presentation would not straightforwardly *contradict* the commentators' stance mentioned above; nevertheless, it will help to spell out an inherent ambiguity which underlies Kant's argument. This will lead me to evaluate, in the section following it, the cogency of Kant's argument.

## 4 On Two Ambiguities in Kant's Argument

Let us take another look at the core of the position Kant ascribes to the theodictist. According to Kant, in order to neutralize ACP for the sake of theodicy, the theodictist maintains that ACP is only a

[...] violation against human wisdom [...] [whereas] divine wisdom judges [...] according to totally different rules, incomprehensible to us [...] the ways of the most high are not our ways [...] what we with right find reprehensible with reference to our practical reason and its determination might yet perhaps [according to an alleged theodicean argument that strives to eliminate ACP] be in relation to the divine ends and the highest wisdom precisely the most fitting means to our practical welfare and the greatest good of the world as well.<sup>29</sup>

Now, what does the theodictist precisely claim? It seems that two distinct interpretations of his allegation can be offered, both of them rooted, or so it seems, in the text: (a) that "divine wisdom judges according to totally different rules, incomprehensible to us" may imply that God is not a moral God, meaning that God's *morality* is allegedly different from ours, and that what God perceives as moral (that is to say, the very content of morality) is inaccessible to us. In this case, not only do we not understand *how* ACP can serve as a means to an end;

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<sup>29</sup> *MpVT*, AA 08: 258.

we simply cannot comprehend *the end itself*, since God's end essentially differs from ours. According to this interpretation, *morality itself* loses its unconditional status, since the theodist maintains, even if he does not necessarily obtain a *positive* idea of it, that there is a different morality *for God*; (b) "what we with right find reprehensible [...] might yet perhaps be in relation to the divine ends and the highest wisdom precisely the most fitting means to our practical welfare." According to this allegation, it seems that the theodist plainly holds that God is, after all, a moral being; God is interested in our "practical welfare", of which we surely have an idea, and what we cannot comprehend is only *how* this can be in line with ACP in the world. Notice that the first allegation renders God's morality *as such* incomprehensible to us, thus suggesting a possible alternative morality, whilst the second renders only God's *ways* to fulfill his (comprehensible to us) moral aim incomprehensible. Thus, due to the second claim, the moral law retains its unconditional status, whereas only according to the first allegation morality seems to be deprived of its unconditional status.

Here we must distinguish between Kant's own position regarding this question, and what he seemingly ascribes to the theodist. Concerning Kant's own position, it seems obvious enough that the second interpretation, rather than the first one, captures the spirit of his critical project. Kant's concept of God is unequivocally a moral one, as his three versions for the *moral proof of the existence of God* insinuate.<sup>30</sup> In point of fact, the only difference in regard to morality between the Kantian God and finite (free) agents lies, according to Kant, in the distinct formal structure of the will (homogeneous in the divine case, heterogeneous in the finite one), namely in the *mode of givenness* of morality, and *not* in the very content of morality, as the following citation vividly shows:

A perfectly good will [viz. God's] would thus be as quite as much subject to objective laws (of the good), but could not be conceived as thereby necessitated to act in conformity with moral law, inasmuch as it can of itself, according to its subjective constitution, be determined only by the representation of the good.<sup>31</sup>

A divine will, then, differs from a finite one in that it has no need of an *imperative*, since it acts already *von selbst* in accordance with the moral law; the moral law, however, retains its unconditional status anyway, and an *alternative* moral law, for God as well, is impossible.

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**30** On the different versions of the moral argument by Kant and on God's systematic function in Kant's ethical theory, see Sala 1993, 182–207.

**31** GMS, AA 04: 414.

As presented in the above, if we rely solely on Kant's formulations in the paragraph cited above, the question regarding the position he ascribes to the theodist seems not to lend itself to an unequivocal interpretation, for it seems that he ascribes to him simultaneously both (a) and (b). Despite this, if Kant's vehement moral detestation of his rival's position at the end of this paragraph, which serves as Kant's *anti-theodicean argument* as well, is taken into account, it seems that he must have ascribed to the theodist the first and not the second interpretation. That is to say: when Kant argues that "this apology, in which the vindication is worse than the complaint, needs no refutation; surely it can be freely given over to the detestation of every human being who has the least feeling of morality", he must have launched an attack on a position which claims that God's morality as such (namely, God's *end* itself) is foreign to us, and not on the position according to which God's *means* for reaching a (comprehensible to us) moral end are foreign to us, for the last position accords, in essence, with Kant's own. Apart from what seems to be the very trespassing of reason's limit by denying ACP (as we shall presently see, a *positive* denial of ACP is not necessarily the position of the theodist), this very denial, so goes Kant's argument, advocates theodicy at the expense of *God's morality*, namely, at the expense of *morality's unconditional status as such*. And, facing this exclusive disjunction – theodicy *or* morality, Kant decisively chooses morality.

So Kant's argument is the following: *if* ACP is denied, *then* it follows that the unconditional status of morality is denied as well; and it captures Kant's intent only if it is assumed that the first allegation (the denial of ACP means that God's *end* is incomprehensible to us) and not the second (the denial of ACP means that God's *ways* to fulfill his moral end, which is comprehensible to us, are incomprehensible to us) is the theodist's position.

However, after overcoming the first ambiguity, which pertains to the precise meaning of the allegation "the ways of the most high are not our own", a second ambiguity surfaces. The theodist suggests a denial of ACP that leads to the abovementioned claim regarding God's 'ways'; however, this denial may have two meanings as well: does the theodist merely raise the *possibility that* ACP is CCP, or does he *positively hold that* ACP is CCP? In both instances, ACP is denied. And here, too, the text gives rise to both possibilities. At the outset it seems that the theodist is decisive enough in holding positively that ACP is CCP: "there is no such thing as an absolute counterpurposiveness" (*daß es ein solches schlechterdings Zweckwidriges [...] gar nicht gebe*). By arguing that, the theodist clearly oversteps the limits of reason and pretends to penetrate the supersensible. On the other hand, the theodist also employs the following formulation: "what we with right find reprehensible with reference to our practical reason and its determination *might yet perhaps* [*mag vielleicht gerade sein*] [...] be in relation to the divine

ends.” Here the theodist does *not* overstep the limits of reason, for he does not claim positively that ACP is CCP (a positive denial of ACP), but merely holds that ACP *might be* CCP. And it seems that *both* possibilities, despite the fact that the first, contrary to the second, does not overstep the limits of reason, lead to the same moral-detestation conclusion, since Kant himself includes them both in the same paragraph which ends up in his moral rejection of the theodist’s stance.

Now, if Kant means that the theodist merely raises the possibility that ACP might be CCP (the second interpretation), then surely his vehement moral rejection of such a move is not warranted; if Kant is to *positively* reject the mere *possibility* that ACP might be CCP, then he himself would overstep the limits of reason, for in that case he would claim to know positively that ACP is *not* CCP. Recall, as I indicated in the first section, that Kant merely refutes an absolute denial or affirmation of ACP in the world as an anti-theodicean argument, and does not claim to have theoretical knowledge of its status; so, just as the theodist holds that it is possible that ACP might be CCP, Kant maintains that it is possible that ACP might not be ACP. And merely indicating this possibility (that ACP *might not be* CCP after all) suffices for Kant to show the miscarriage of theodicy. So, if Kant holds that indicating the mere possibility that ACP might be CCP leads to a denial of the unconditional status of morality, his argument is not cogent: it is perfectly consistent to claim that ACP might be CCP and simultaneously retain the unconditional status of morality.

But suppose that the theodist holds that ACP is CCP (namely, a positive denial of ACP), and not just that ACP *might be* CCP. Clearly enough, such an allegation trespasses the limits of reason according to Kant. However, as we have seen, it is not the trespassing of the limits of reason *per se* which outrages Kant here, but rather the upshot of this allegation: that ACP is CCP seems to result in rebuffing the unconditional status of morality.

As I show in the next section, even if Kant’s rival holds that ACP is CCP, and not just that ACP *might be* CCP, Kant’s anti-theodicean argument, according to which this allegation undermines the unconditional status of morality, is not cogent.

## 5 ACP is CCP and Morality’s Unconditional Status

Recall that it is agreed upon that holding that ACP is CCP, contrary to merely holding that ACP might be CCP, is not in line with the spirit of Kant’s philosophical project, for it entwines a trespassing of reason’s limits. As we have seen, however, Kant’s first anti-theodicean argument does not center on his epistemo-

logical rejection of such an allegation, but on his *moral* detestation of it, namely, on what seems to be the *upshot* of such a trespassing: a denial of morality's unconditional status.

In this regard, in order for Kant to show that his argument is cogent, he simply has to show that a positive denial of ACP would entail a conditioning of morality. Notice, however, that there are *two* possible positive claims regarding ACP: (a) ACP is CCP (a positive denial of ACP, the theodist claim) (b) ACP is *not* CCP (a positive affirmation of ACP). Both claims overstep the limits of reason. However, as I would argue in this section, it is plainly claim (b) that risks morality's unconditional status, whereas claim (a), advocated by the theodist, does not undermine morality's unconditional status.

So, suppose the theodist positively holds that ACP is CCP – expressly, a positive denial of ACP: which consequences follow from this claim for the two most fundamental keystones in Kant's ethical theory, namely (a) the categorical imperative (and the moral law), and (b) the possibility of the realization of the highest good?

Regarding (a), recall that, according to Kant, the categorical imperative is logically independent of experience. In point of fact, Kant stresses time and again that the categorical imperative retains its validity even if not a single agent has ever acted morally thus far: “the question at issue here is not whether this or that happened but that reason of itself and independently of all experience commands what ought to happen.”<sup>32</sup> Experience, thus, plays only a negative role in the justification of Kant's ethics, since all that matters, from a Kantian perspective, is that free agents do *not* act morally, regardless of the concrete reasons for this (these reasons could be, say, laziness, weakness of the will, or rather radical evil, and so on), and that they *can* act morally (*ought* implies *can*). Thus, whether one holds that there *is* ACP in the world, or that there *is no* ACP in the world (both claims trespass the limits of reason), neither claim exerts influence on the unconditional status ascribed to the categorical imperative. In this regard, it is perfectly compatible to positively deny ACP in the world *and simultaneously* not lose a grain of one's ‘feeling of morality’, that is, to respect the moral law and ascribe it an unconditional status.

Regarding (b), commentators disagree on whether the concept of the possibility of the highest good is a necessary component of Kant's ethical theory, or, as some maintain,<sup>33</sup> merely an external additional question unrelated to the essence of morality. *Prima facie*, since the highest good is formally defined by

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<sup>32</sup> GMS, AA 04: 408.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Auxter 1979, 121–134; Murphy 1965, 102–110.

Kant as the appropriate proportion between virtue and happiness<sup>34</sup> (and, thereby, introduces a notion of an *end*), it cannot be considered a systematic component of ethics proper. If an expectation of an awaited remuneration is involved in the determination of the will, then the action cannot be considered moral *by definition*. Nonetheless, Kant explicitly writes that “if [...] the highest good is impossible according to practical rules, then the moral law which commands that it be furthered must be fantastic, directed to empty imaginary ends, and consequently inherently false.”<sup>35</sup> This statement, as well as others similar to it, generated the view that the highest good is, in fact, an essential inherent part of Kant’s ethical theory.<sup>36</sup>

Now, if the possibility of the highest good, namely, of a perfectly moral world free from CPs of all kinds is not an essential part of Kant’s ethical theory, then the denial of ACP in the world is not relevant to the current discussion. Let us assume, then, for the sake of argument, that the possibility of the highest good is indeed an inherent constituent of Kant’s ethical project, and that without it the moral law is “inherently false and empty”, as Kant put it; in that case, undermining the possibility of the highest good would amount to undermining the unconditional status of morality, and that would offend “every human being who has the least feeling of morality”. Would a positive denial of ACP actually jeopardize the unconditional status of morality?

In point of fact, only an absolute *affirmation* of ACP, namely the claim that ACP is not CCP, and not an absolute *denial* of ACP, namely the claim that ACP is CCP, risks straightforwardly the possibility of a realization of the highest good, thus jeopardizing morality’s unconditional status.<sup>37</sup> By holding the possibility of a full-fledged realization of the highest good, we commit ourselves, in essence, to a denial of ACP, and practically to a denial of all kinds of CPs whatsoever. The denial of ACP, however, which results from the claim that the highest good is possible, is not *a theoretical denial*; it is perfectly consistent, in Kantian terms, to argue *that* ACP must be CCP, and simultaneously to admit that we do not know *how* ACP is CCP. So, a theoretical denial of ACP must arouse, indeed, Kant’s epistemological anger; however, it is hard to see why it must arouse Kant’s *moral* fury, as expressed in his first anti-theodicean argument; in fact, only the opposite claim (ACP is not CCP) must arouse both epistemological as well as moral fury.

<sup>34</sup> KpV, AA 05: 110–113.

<sup>35</sup> KpV, AA 05: 114.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Mariña 2000, 329–55.

<sup>37</sup> Kremer has already alluded to the possible tension between the existence of moral evil and the belief in an ultimate moral order (a full-fledged realization of the highest good); see Kremer 1909, 167 f.

## 6 Conclusion

Kant's first anti-theodicean argument is, as mentioned above, not the only argument he raises against theodicy, since ACP represents only one specific problem that theodicy must provide an explanation for. However, Kant's argument in this case is an illustration of the background against which he perceived this to be the problem of theodicy on the whole, since his main interest in arguing against theodicy is first and foremost moral.

As I pointed out, the core of Kant's argument is the seemingly "natural" link between a denial of ACP and a denial of the unconditional status of morality. Given that the first denial leads to the second one, it is clear why Kant vehemently rejects theodicy *on moral grounds*. However, as I argued, the denial of ACP is, in point of fact, ambiguous, and may refer to both 1) ACP is CCP, and to 2) ACP *might be* CCP. Whereas the second claim is fully in line – in epistemic as well as in moral respects – with Kant's philosophy, the first violates Kant's *epistemology*, but it by no means threatens Kant's *morality* as an unconditional project. So Kant first anti-theodicean argument, given the background of Kant's philosophy on the whole, is not cogent; Kant should have rejected the claim: ACP is CCP (a positive denial of ACP) solely on epistemic grounds, but not (as he did) on moral ones.

Notice, finally, that my claim in this paper pertains solely to Kant's first anti-theodicean *argument*, and by no means to Kant's *claim* regarding the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy. It seems to me that Kant is justified in claiming that, in light of his philosophical enterprise at large, theodicy is no longer admissible. If theodicy entails not merely the claim that it is possible that God's moral nature is in line with "the multitude of crying examples of the [evil] actions of men put before our eyes,"<sup>38</sup> but also means an account of *how* these two are compatible (like Dieringer, I believe that Kant held the first, and rejected the second), then it seems to me that Kant was justified in rejecting theodicy. Thus, rebuffing Kant's first anti-theodicean *argument* does not necessarily amount to a rejection of Kant's anti-theodicean *claim* as a whole; in this regard, the title of *MpVT* seems to adequately describe Kant's position.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> RGV: AA 06: 32f.

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- AA *Akademieausage Kants Gesammelter Schriften*. Eds. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (vols. 1–22), Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (vol. 23), Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (from vol. 24). Berlin 1900–.
- GMS *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. English citations from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. J. W. Ellington. Indianapolis 1981.
- KprV *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. English citations from *Critique of Practical Reason*. Trans. L. W. Beck. New York 1956.
- KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. English citations from *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. P. Guyer/A. W. Wood. Cambridge 1998.
- KU *Kritik der Urteilkraft*. English citations from *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. W. S. Pluhar. Indianapolis 1987.
- MpVT *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*. English citations from *Religion and Rational Theology*. Trans. A. W. Wood/G. D. Giovanni. Cambridge 1996.
- RGV *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*. English citations from *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*. Trans. T. M. Greene/H. H. Hudson. New York 1934.

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